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Citation: Creaby-Attwood, Nick (2011) Do I not like that! Reward preferences and ideology in the employment relationship. In: Northumbria Research Conference, 5 May - 6 May 2011, Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

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Do I not like that! Reward preferences and ideology in the employment relationship

Nick Creaby-Attwood

There is a gap in understanding between the studies of employment relationships on the one hand, and employee rewards on the other. This gap is broadly manifested in two ways: firstly, by the absence of holistic approaches that seek to articulate the interactions between the employment relationship and employee reward systems. Secondly, by the differences in approach taken between these fields.

This study attempts to contribute to the development of a more holistic approach towards these two domains by considering the role of reward preferences within the employment relationship. Drawing upon data from two cases, this study utilises Gomez-Mejia and Balkin's (1992) algorithmic-experiential framework to model reward outcomes and parties' reward preferences. The relationship between reward outcomes and reward preferences will be considered in respect of parties' ideology.

The nature of parties' perceptions of reward 'success' and its implications for parties' ideology and other employment relations processes has substantial significance for understanding the potential for cooperation and adversarialism within a relationship. This also has significance for the interpretation of 'mutual gains' (Bacon and Blyton, 2007, Dobbins and Gunnigle, 2009, Guest and Peccei, 2001, Kochan and Osterman, 1994, Martínez Lucio and Stuart, 2004, Roche, 2009, Suff and Williams, 2004) in employment relations to the extent that the nature of 'gain' should be considered from the perspective of the subject.

A cross sectional study of two, large, unionised private sector manufacturing organisations was undertaken during 2007 and 2008. Key informants were identified in each case, representing the bargaining parties. These comprised the lead manager(s), lay and full-time union officials within each employment relationship. A survey instrument was utilised for the purposes of classifying responses with respect to the adopted theoretical models. Gomez-Mejia and Balkin's (1992) algorithmic-experiential framework was operationalised to capture reward outcomes and reward preferences. Reward outcomes were assessed in relation to this framework based upon the analysis of organisational documents relating to the reward system.

Parties' ideologies were accessed through the operationalisation of Walton and McKersie's (1965) relationship patterns model. This multi-dimensional model identifies four aspects of ideology: motivational tendencies towards the other; legitimacy of the other; trust and friendliness. Each dimension allows for attitudes to be identified along a continuum, taken together the attitudes represent a relationship pattern. Scales were developed from this model for use within the survey instruments.

The link between ideology and reward preferences is complex, and not entirely clear in the sense that reward preferences can be 'read off' from the espoused ideology. One way of making sense of this relationship might be to consider the relative success of parties within the relationship regarding rewards. By making this comparison we can see that the parties exhibiting the least positive attitudes in ideology are the biggest losers in reward outcomes.

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